

“the surface that holds the image is unstable”
sponge

sponge is an association of artists and researchers involved in a conversation concerning the domains of phenomenology, perception and desire.

It emerged out of conversations from a 3 year long seminar at Stanford University about how we can conceptualize and work with digital media or more generally computer-mediated interaction. The participants in that seminar came from literature, mathematics, performance arts and computer science as well as the new media industry, each pressing against the limits of their disciplines. Part of the project was to develop over the years a new language for talking about media and interaction. This was the most important result; a publicly developed, shared language -- not just a collage or a dictionary of mutually alien expertise. sponge's works are in a sense a materialization of certain aspects of that 5 year-old conversation.

We can think of sponge, the association of artists and researchers that is forming in various countries, as a quasi-species, like a cloud of bees that at any particular moment has a well-defined shape, is bound by common attractions to certain ways of asking and materializing questions, and is constantly drifting in the world. A bit playful, a bit dangerous, perhaps.

Destabilizing the concepts of dramaturgy and theatrical performance.

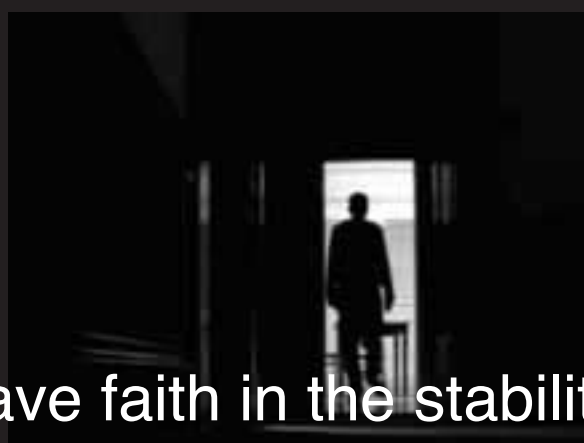
The concept and position of the dramaturg and director as the main site of interpretation is being dissolved in this so-called age of digital media. Until very recently, the dramaturg's position was defined in strictly literary terms— when we say literary we mean not only dramatic but historical, sociological, economic — all leading to the concept of interpretation, whether this be for texts or images. Once we enter into a regime where media and matter become pliant, dynamical and fluid, however, the reigning conventions of text and interpretation no longer hold much authority. We are long past the moment when we can be satisfied with a unitary or heroic interpreter, whether this is a literary interpreter (dramaturg) or a theatrical one (director). Why do we need a single presence to act as the interpretive filter when the very filters are continuously shifting and being updated? It goes

without saying that the age of digital media, dramaturgy can no longer be defined in strictly literary terms. There has been a lot of talk about "post-literate dramaturgy"— but the problem is that for all of this radical talk, the objects of this dramaturgy still remain strictly in the art realm (or, for the most part, in the epistemological black box of the theater).

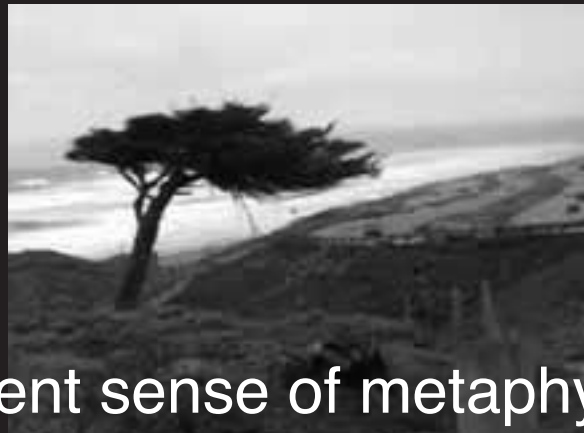
sponge is interested in setting up compelling conditions which enable people to make their own meanings out of built spaces and environments (spaces being architectural, symbolic and media) and for this reason we are looking outside of the domain of art – to fields such as human-computer interaction, ethnography and information design. These sorts of enterprises use methods very different from the convention of narrative to construct a compelling or meaningful experience. In such work, we don't have the conditions where the viewers are expected to receive one or even more than one narrative from a fixed point, whether that point is an architectural or psychological one. Instead, meaning-generating interpretations and histories are constructed fluidly in the course of embodied and embedded social activity.

Conventions of (public) space

We're playing with the conventions of public space; the conventions of behavior that we bring when we enter such a space as well as how the architectures and institutions that construct these public spaces condition our behavior. Take, for example, the gallery. When you arrive at the gallery, you expect to be able to wander through it undisturbed and without being required to perform or respond. Furthermore, you don't expect to engage with others, except perhaps in the most cursory of ways—"oh isn't that interesting," or "I don't understand this" and so on. The convention is that as a spectator you occupy a space of neutrality, as if you and the objects you gaze at have diplomatic immunity. Another convention we are exploring is that of the amusement park. Once entering an amusement park, you become a part of a game environment and anything can happen, within a set of prescribed rules. You give your trust over to "the maker" or "orchestrator" of the event, saying, in effect, I am part of and complicit in this experience.



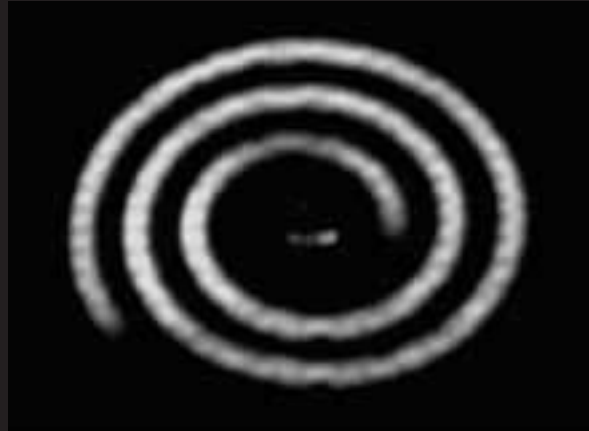
why do we have faith in the stability of the world?



the ever present sense of metaphysical haunting



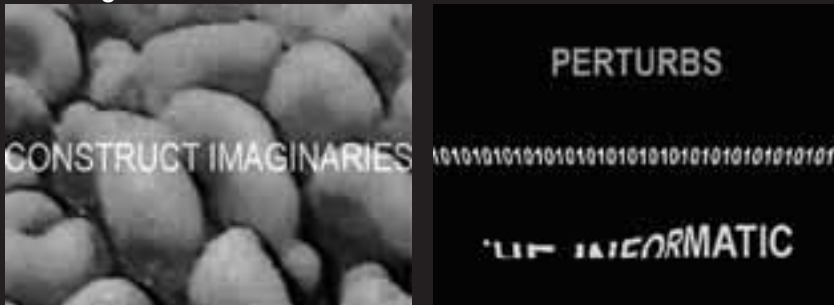
patterns emerge in the wake of our hand



when knowing crumbles

Space reconsidered.

The irony of these conventions that we've just described is that these so-called public spaces aren't really public. Not public if you compare it to the classical *res publica*. Public space is a social setting in which members of the polis can collectively express their opinions and, given a good enough formal structure, even take part in the governing or at least the judgment of their society. We are not, however, making soapboxes (podiums) on which people will stand to shout their opinions. Rather, we are looking at how their collective imagination and their social relations that form as a result of the events make these environments public spaces. We're also examining other publics alternative to the classical notion of the public, drawing from, for example, the circus, the piazza, the street, the festival and the playground..



Theatrical conventions

In our current research, we're interested in dissolving the stage itself. This means saying goodbye for the time being to the traditional set relations between performer and viewer. We're not trying to do this in a forced way, as many 1960's theatrical experiments that "democratized" the stage did by pulling spectators over the proscenium and onto the stage itself. We're after something much subtler, designing situations and events where unpredicted spatial and social conventions emerge out of locally-situated actions.

Performance

One of the themes threading through our experiments, since M1 (1997), has been the question, what constitutes performance? By performance we are interpolating between several senses of performance, starting

with very ordinary gestures: drawing a hand across a chalkboard or shaping a piece of mud, walking out of a store and tossing something into a trash container. What do you have to do with such gestures before they will be marked (perceived) as pre-scripted performance? In M1, we played with different ways to mark a gesture-- repetition, geometry of bodies, ignoring ambient intentions, etc. We amplified and diminished gestures across the thresholds of performance. We have taken this question much farther in M2 (1998) and now M3(1999-2002).

M3

We are designing our current work, M3, as a funhouse with multiple spaces and each of the spaces answers the question about conventions in very different ways. The three rooms are Puzzle, Sauna, and the T-Garden. The Puzzle is a maze of discrete rules, conventions,

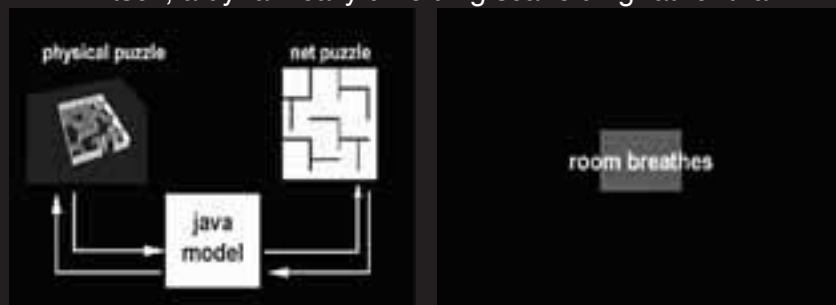


and choices. You enter and are confronted with a direct physical challenge: travel through this space and exit. But everything you do inevitably complicates not only your space but also your neighbors' space. Furthermore, as in the Coliseum, your fellow "citizens" watch the game from above as you try to navigate and solve this challenge. Puzzle is a spatial nightmare: you fall into a world of rules that you must learn and use in order to escape. Space is conventionalized in the Puzzle from the history and mythology of labyrinths mazes, panopticons and coliseums.

The second room, the Saunas, is a series of individual chambers, each having their own unique media systems and states. These chambers, which function like toll-booths between the spaces of the Puzzle and the T-Garden, are pleasure machines that the players have to pass through. They explore the polarities between sensory overload and deprivation, vision and hearing,

and peripheral versus foveal attention. Each has its own spatial characteristics which suggest cleansing rooms, baths, saunas-places you can go to slow down go to heighten the senses and sweat out the media toxins that clog your perceptual experience every day. In some of the chambers the players have to lie down, in others, their bodies are immobilized by the architectural conditions of the room. For the most part, each of the players is alone in these chambers.

In the last environment of the T-Garden, however, we also ask the question of how spatial conventions arise. When players get to the T-Garden, after passing through the "veil" of the Saunas, there is less of an identifiable external frame (such as theater, gallery or amusement park) within which the players can structure their experience. Instead, the conventions are internal to the space itself, a dynamically unfolding scaffolding rather than



a frame or a hard exoskeleton. When you enter the T-Garden, you gradually become conscious not only of yourself but also of how others around you affect the environment and consequently, your experience.

For example, normally we are not particularly conscious of body-space, but when we walk into the T-Garden where our clothing begins to interfere with the media dynamics of the room, we suddenly become conscious of proximity. The air grows thick with sound, visual texture and tension. We become conscious of our clothing as a skin to us. This is one way we investigate the emergence of the sense of spatiality and felt meaning in the course of gesture and action.

Control

The interesting thing is where you don't set up or script the entire experience but script the conditions by which

multiple kinds of experiences can occur within certain constraints. The artist no longer controls the playing field. When we construct these computer systems using the most sophisticated technologies of control, the possibility of the breakdown of control lies just on horizon. You recognize that there is an inherent agency to the system that you have set up and that no one controller or interpreter is the master of that system.

Automutation

Now, in the current project M3, we are interested in games and in play, on how it possible for people to invent or change the rules in play. In order to study these kinds of activities, we could sit behind a blind and watch "the performance," writing down behaviorist descriptions of what we see. This will teach us something, but not the deepest lessons. If our project is



auto-mutation – making it possible for people to change the very fabric of their world, then we cannot use the same classical notions used by "performance theory," of simply having a so-called neutral observer behind the screen, observing the performance. We really have to get in there with the players and make it possible for us and them to change the system in real time, "on the fly."

Experience

We of course are dealing with the fundamental question of the journey of a player's experience. On one level this is interesting from the perspective of information design. For instance, how do we map (the user's) experience? How does a person construct a sensible experience as s/he moves through a space, whether that space is physical and/or media driven? How does a person make one's way in the world? This brings into play

temporality, purpose, fate. Our cultural context compresses experience into a finite and bounded event, but is this necessarily so? Theater, or more specifically, what we normally think of as theater, is very slow to deal



m1 1997@sponge 2000

with these questions, particularly since the "conventions of space" are so rigidly defined. You don't really find yourself in an embodied experience, because you are immobilized in a seat. Of course, we're not just talking about a theater

without seats— where the action moves and you the viewer move with it or where you are "in the midst of the action." In these so-called promenade models there is still the privileging of an object (i.e., The Performance) that you have come to watch but rarely to experience in a direct embodied action. We can look back at the whole history of optical perspective to see such vision machines in action. The interesting thing is that so many institutions which pride themselves as experimen-



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tal or which appear to be interested in new cultural developments still rely on these old vision apparatuses. Many in the theater seem not particularly interested in the design and even auto-mutation of an experience.

Substrates

What we're highlighting here, is this important difference between pre-scripted experience and experience which is not pre-scripted. Conventional issues are the lines (or folds) between audience- performer, staged space and audience space, character and actor, etc. Framed

against those conventions, we're asking, "Where does meaning come from?" Instead of pre-defining objects such as "actor," "spectator," or "performance," we're working at the substrate of experience – our material is a substrate in which meaning-making takes place.

The dance of agencies

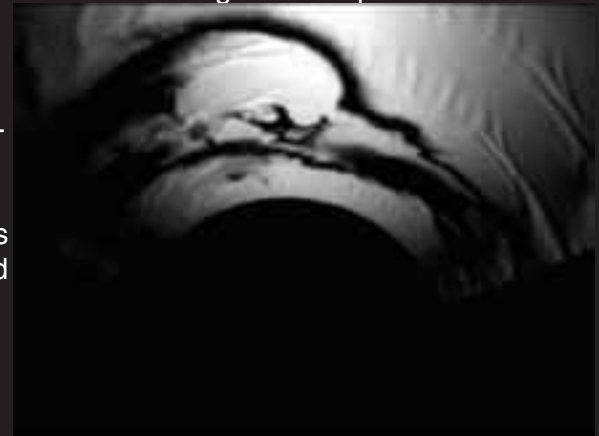
Historian of science Andrew Pickering talked persuasively and provocatively about this dance

between material and human agencies. The architect Christopher Alexander talked about the evolution of living patterns in built space as a complex of geometry, people's imaginations responding to the geometry, their action in that imagination and events constituted by their actions. We are taking our work beyond Alexander by designing and playing in the material field itself, using media and computational technologies to shape substrates of experi-



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ence. For example, we set-up the technological substrate for the T-Garden in M3 so that the sounds that are generated are sensitive to your proximity, how you move and how you relate to others in



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the environment. There is no explicit convention as to what you have to say or how or where you have to stand. There are no set of steps, no lanes painted onto the floor, nothing proclaims 'you stand here, and the performer stands there.' Rather than determining conventions of behavioral management or perceptual codification, we are designing something like the physics of a

world.

Public Experiments

We say that we are building experiments, but our laboratories are not bounded as techno-scientific labs, and our subjects are not simply objects. In fact, our laboratory, which is partly made of responsive media, is itself not a fixed object – its form is deformed under the action, the impact of these subjects who go through the space. And finally, our subjects may not be subjects at all, human or non-human, but rather diffused flows of agencies – fleshy, fabric, computational or media agencies.

Emergent (symbolic/computational/media) spatiality

We, of course, have been talking about physical space, but also in all these rooms in M3 there is a media space that is crucial because it allows us to fuse the physical and the symbolic (i.e.computational) so that they interact with each other. In other words, sponge is setting up the conditions of this interaction but not controlling it. The media processes animating our responsive spaces work at a level much finer than what human agents can reach. We are using computer technology to help build thick textures of experience. We work with physical and fleshy experience as well but that's not as easily mutated as digital media or code. In sum, we have an architectural space, a symbolic or computational space and finally, a media space, and all of these spaces interact with each other in unpredictable and surprising ways.

Deformation of media

Unpredictability, however, is far from randomness. We are aiming to build evocative spaces of play. For example, T-Garden's para-physics has a very tangible response that people learn to play as they move through various media. Their actions take on more and more meaning as the people move in relation not only with each other but also with the material and media agencies of the space. We are deeply concerned with how people, media and matter dancing together build the felt meaning of our lives.

Unstable media

This dimension of instability we dealt explicitly in our project M2. In M2, we were talking about the instability of media, the instability of language, the instability of these symbolic structures that people make. However, one of the features of M2 was, at bottom a phenomenological-stability. We think this stability comes from matter, that we are material beings and that that materiality gives us the stability of experience. The example that we use over and over again is the following: When you walk into a room and you put your foot on the floor you do not think that the atoms of your foot will turn into gamma radiation, you do not think that your foot will tunnel quantum-mechanically through the wood. One could say it's by convention that your body expects the floor to sustain you. But it's deeper than convention, it's the sedimented experience, to deliberately use phenomenological language.

...vs phenomenological stability

This is the profound part of our experiential stability. The mystery we discover is that we are able to move in the world without that kind of material anxiety. We may have psychological, historical and emotional anxieties from isolation, loneliness, (all of which we dealt with in the media of M2) – all of these symbolic anxieties, and yet most of the time we have a material stability. That is what makes human experience possible, this is the substrate of human experience. However, in M2 we were also dealing with another type of instability – that of haunting. That under all of these techno-systems of control and vision and hearing and all of these assaults on perception from media machines, there lies something fragile – verging on the edge of disappearance.

Performance, expanded

When we discuss performance it should be clear that we are interpolating between several senses of performance. One of them is the idea of micro-performance which goes back, for example, to geometric sketching as a technology of performance, where we look at a tool as

function or as intention, rather than as a tool to represent an object. The term "user" has a problem in that it is connotes a subject using something, using "x", using an object. We move to this notion of actants and actors with a lower case "a," performing with a lower case "p" where performance is a much more low-key activity: the making of traces, the making of symbols, the shaping of objects which are temporally-embedded processes. It's always something that you can fall into or step out of but usually you fall into.

Constraints

The constraints of course that we cannot escape are human agency, material agency and disciplinary agency. What people carry with them into the T-Garden are their histories – individual and collective – the different human agencies. Yet we are equally fascinated by the agency of the material, the friction of cloth, the decay of data, the elasticity of MIDI-controlled sound, and by the agency of disciplines – grammar, algebra, systems of orthography, legal systems, and so forth. These are all larger than any one of us, and yet they are born out of our own actions.

Actor vs. Actant

We start to imagine, as we've already said, the idea of user or "actant," as opposed to an audience or spectator. Spectator implies passive, user is active. The user takes on his or her responsibility for moving through an experience. This goes toward the distinction between knowing that and knowing how or even better, between looking and doing, to make this distinction very coarsely. Philosophers have talked about this in terms of epistemology; always interpreting experience as a problem of cognition and logical truth mediated through sense perception. So the question is phrased in analytical terms, knowing that something is the case vs. knowing how to do it. We are going beyond that: instead of just knowing or seeing, we are also interested in doing, in taking action in the world. This is why we take issue with the terms "spectator" or "witness." We are not interested in witnesses anymore. In fact, even the term spectacle we would challenge.

Transforming the tool

We want to go further still. We are interested in the user or the actant influencing the process by which the work and the experience itself is made-from prototyping and learning from these kinds of experiments (in the product design sense) as well as by the ability to change the event itself. For example, in drawing programs such as Photoshop or Canvas or Painter, there's nothing you can do to change how the program works. You want this computer screen here to assume some qualities, say the material quality of bleeding ink into paper. Now, how would you do it? One way would be to script it. If you had a scripting language (like Java or Mathematica), then you could specify in that language, say the behavior of a lattice model of ink on paper: "when these bits are turned on, in the next time step, the pixels around it will be changed thus and so." Basically, it's designing a convolution.

Now, most times the only people who make such definitions are mathematicians and engineers, not designers or artists. Most people cannot do anything at all like this with most technology today. We're interested in making it possible for someone who is trying to "write," in the broadest sense, to refashion the tools of writing him or herself. A reflexivity of action.

Originally written from an interview with sponge conducted by Fabienne Regnaut and Franck Bauchard for the French publication *ec/artS*, issue #2 2000.